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Preaching unbelief: Freethought in Boston, 1825--1850

James Rogers

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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PREACHING UNBELIEF: FREETHOUGHT IN BOSTON, 1825-1850

BY

**JAMES ROGERS
BA, UNIVERSITY OF YORK (U.K.), 2011**

THESIS

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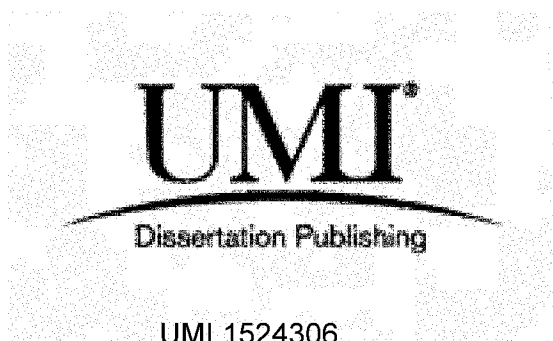
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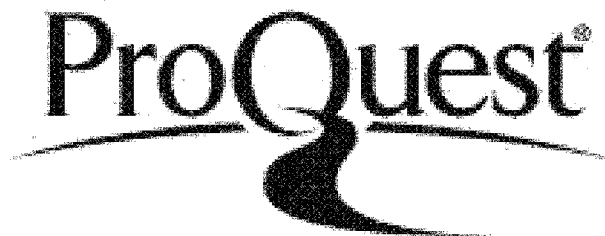


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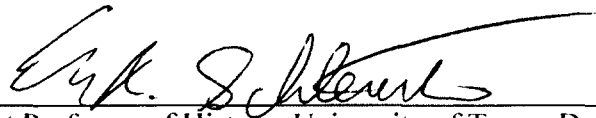
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Thesis Director, Jessica Lepler, Assistant Professor of History



J. William Harris, Professor of History



Eric Schlereth, Assistant Professor of History, University of Texas, Dallas

August 12, 2013

Date

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ABSTRACT

PREACHING UNBELIEF: FREETHOUGHT IN BOSTON, 1825-1850

by

James Rogers

University of New Hampshire, September, 2013

Freethinkers in the early nineteenth century embarked upon unprecedented organizational efforts in a period characterized by evangelical religious awakenings. In the face of almost pervasive discrimination, unbelievers conspicuously appropriated the recruitment and publicity methods of Christian organizations. Radical developments in print technology resulted in the publication of atheistic books and periodicals, none of which survived longer than the *Boston Investigator*. Its editor, Abner Kneeland, further disseminated antitheistic thought through oratorical performances and by engaging with contemporary social issues. More than this, unbelievers unashamedly copied specific religious practices: they sang rational hymns celebrating “truth” and science, and individual freethinking intellectuals gave secular “sermons” to their “congregations.” By constructing an interconnected network of freethinking individuals and groups, nineteenth-century unbelievers kept antireligious arguments in the public arena. As such, they lay the groundwork for the future success of atheist organizations, and in particular the global movement of today’s “New Atheism.”

INTRODUCTION

On November 19, 2011, Republican candidate Newt Gingrich was asked in a primary debate in Des Moines, Iowa, whether he thought that an atheist could ever occupy the White House. “No,” he replied, “if you said to me that we were electing somebody who believed that they *by themselves* were strong enough to be President of the United States, I would tell you that person terrifies me because they completely misunderstand how weak and how limited any human being is.” A month later, when asked a similar question in a debate in Las Vegas, Gingrich answered: “How can you have judgement if you have no faith? How can I trust you with power if you don’t pray?” The resounding applause that greeted both of these statements highlights the uncomfortable – often hostile – relationship between modern American politics and anti-religious thought. Indeed, this tension has been quantified in recent national surveys, demonstrating to a remarkable extent the disdain with which a majority of Americans hold atheists in their society. A PEW Research poll in June, 2011 showed that, for those surveyed, atheists were approximately as trustworthy as rapists.¹ Atheist history, largely as a result of these stereotypical views of the atheist as immoral, faces the same problems as, to give a contemporary example, gay history. The taboo surrounding these subjects – particularly within the United States – has provided cultural obstacles to the construction of comprehensive histories of these

¹ This survey was cited in numerous newspapers. See, for example, “Are Atheists Worse than Rapists?”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 29, 2012. <http://www.suntimes.com/news/otherviews/13486541-452/are-atheists-worse-than-rapists.html>. Accessed November 14, 2012. The study itself is of course circumstantial, and it would be dangerous to apply these conclusions to American society as a whole. However, the results do strongly indicate the pervasive distaste with which much of American society views the atheistic position.

often prosecuted groups. As James Turner – one of the few historians to address this topic – has noted, “We all tend to project our own convictions about the existence of God onto the canvas of history.”² This has not prevented the creation of a vast number of works in the field of American religious history, nor should it prevent – as it perhaps has done – the growth of atheist history as a legitimate and important field for understanding the philosophical, social, and cultural history of the United States.

A further obstacle to atheist history has been the appropriateness of the use of specific labels to describe the religious beliefs – or, more pertinently, the absence of religious beliefs – of nineteenth-century individuals. Richard Dawkins – the contemporary public spearhead of the “New Atheism” – has constructed a seven-point scale of agnosticism, on which “one” represents someone who is certain of the existence of a god, and “seven” represents someone who is certain that there is no god. Dawkins places himself at a “six,” and few of his “New Atheist” contemporaries express complete certainty in the non-existence of a deity.³ Historians must of course be careful of projecting modern atheistic nomenclature onto the past. However, Christopher Hitchens’s coining of the term “antitheist” could be justifiably applied to many noted nineteenth-century individuals. This is particularly true in the context of their disdain for the influence of organized religion on society. For clarity, however, this thesis will use only those terms that existed in the nineteenth-century lexicon: freethinker, deist, and the derogatory terms infidel and atheist. While the former two

² James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 3.

³ See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006). The other primary members of this “New Atheism” movement are the author Christopher Hitchens and the American philosophers Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris. Their antitheist works include: Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).

terms may have had connotations outside of the topic of religion, in the context of belief in a deity they were synonymous.⁴

Once these obstacles to the creation of a history of American atheism have been overcome, the extent to which anti-religious thought played a role in shaping the construction of society and culture will become much more transparent. The first half of the nineteenth century – characterized by the Second Great Awakening – represented a formative period in the history of American freethought, sandwiched between the decline of eighteenth century deism and the emergence of the “Golden Age” of Ingersollian secularism in the 1860s.⁵ This intermediate period saw explicit attempts on behalf of non-believers to organize into national and regional societies, and particularly to utilize specific methods of popularization in order to raise public consciousness of the presence of anti-religious sentiment. Organization was particularly prevalent in the urban centers of the North East; New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were home to the majority of freethought publications, and played host most frequently to orations and sermons propounding the freethinker’s ideals.

Events and intellectual trends in Boston, following the rise of freethought organization in the 1820s, provide perhaps the most comprehensive context in which to study the methods available to the freethinker. Between 1825 and 1850, Boston saw the last ever occurrence of a man – Abner Kneeland – being tried for and

⁴ The historians’ choice of nomenclature has, in some cases, been dictated by their religious biases. Martin Marty, for example, uses the term *infidel* almost exclusively when making his unfounded argument that unbelievers were “lacking genius or profundity, misunderstanding the American temper, doctrinaire, negative, extremely individualistic as its proponents often were. [freethinkers] found union and organization difficult.” Martin Marty, *The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1961), 12.

⁵ For a study of the deism of the founding fathers, see David Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For studies of the beliefs and significance of Robert Ingersoll, see Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) and David Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972).

convicted of blasphemy in the United States. This was of particular significance due to Kneeland's position as founder and editor of the *Boston Investigator*; this magazine, established in the early 1830s, became the longest running freethought periodical in the country, surviving until the early twentieth century. Most similar periodicals were fortunate to remain in circulation for a single decade. The trial of Kneeland thus provides a well-documented insight into both popular and legal reactions to increasingly fervent and explicit attacks by freethinkers on what they perceived to be the theocratic encroachment on free society.

Freethought organization was to a large extent a reaction to the growing social influence of evangelical religious societies. The success of these societies has facilitated the construction of a new paradigm in the religious history of antebellum America. The traditional "secularization thesis" of Marx and Weber suggested that "modernization inevitably leads to the decline of religiosity and religious institutions." Historians and sociologists have recently reversed this perspective, suggesting that the disestablishment of state churches and the rise of religious pluralism resulted, simply, in more religion. The new paradigm, for David Nord, "is a theory of religious markets that emphasizes the supply side: the more religious supply, the more religious practice. In short, when people have choices, they choose; and the more choices, the more religion."⁶ Nord, like most religious historians, fails to recognize the parallel developments made by the irreligious community during this period. Freethinkers were able to demonstrate that irreligion was a legitimate and accessible choice in a secularizing society by similarly increasing the reach and quantity of rationalist, skeptical arguments. A disbelief in god became as much of a

⁶ David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57.

sellable commodity – though, admittedly, with far fewer willing buyers – as an evangelical devotion to a deity. Paradoxically, atheists opposed religious marketeering by embarking on a marketing campaign of their own.

The historian James Turner has used this paradigm to suggest that religion itself facilitated the growth of unbelief, as organized churches attempted to adapt to secular advancements in society. “In trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, [and] to the tightening standards of science,” Turner suggests, “the defenders of God slowly strangled Him.” Religionists explicitly attempted to incorporate revealed religion into developments which were largely incompatible with traditional teachings. In doing so, they inadvertently publicized the disconnect between Christian texts and modern contemporary progress.⁷ Turner further argues that American unbelief did not achieve its “mature” form until the post-Civil War period, and he focuses on “a small but diverse (and I think representative) assortment of articulate unbelievers.”⁸ To explicate only the work of individual intellectuals, as Turner does, is to ignore the complexities of the development of anti-religious thought in the early nineteenth century. The history of atheism must incorporate social, cultural, and intellectual history.

The historiography of American freethought is, therefore, still in its embryonic stage. One of the great paradoxes of American history is the transformation of the nation from one established – nominally, at least – as a secular republic to one that has become the bastion of western Christianity, the defender of the faith. But this very

⁷ Turner, *Without God, Without Creed*, xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi.

transformation is perhaps itself responsible for the extraordinarily limited scope of the historical study of American irreligion. A 1950s study of Abner Kneeland and his beliefs – one of the very few that has ever been written – illustrates the inherent difficulties in writing atheist history. Leonard Levy (an *academic* historian at Brown University) opened his article with a paragraph that illustrates the pervasive discrimination faced by unbelievers in the mid-twentieth century:

ABNER KNEELAND was a heretic - a cantankerous, inflexible heretic. Worse still, he was regarded as an immoral being who had crawled forth from the darkness of the Stygian caves to menace Massachusetts in the 1830's. Believe Kneeland, though, and one would think he was a mere harbinger of free thought and a noble exponent of liberty of conscience. His name might now be shrouded in oblivion but for the fact that an outraged community, upon which he inflicted his opinions, retaliated by inflicting martyrdom upon him.⁹

Were it up to Levy, therefore, Abner Kneeland would be an historical unknown. This conclusion was indicative of the channelling of McCarthyist anti-communist rhetoric that was particularly prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s. The social and political context of the Cold War in the second-half of the twentieth-century not only prevented the writing of atheist history on a significant scale, but also made the articulation of objective observations on the subject highly problematic. William Husband's recent study, *Godless Communists*, examines how early Soviet efforts to create an atheistic society tore at the familial foundations of communal relations, exacerbating conflicts between the secular government and the traditions of the lower classes. Husband argues specifically that Soviet religious developments lay not in the struggle between Bolsheviks and Orthodox religionists, but rather in "the personal negotiations and situational accommodations carried out by individual citizens"

⁹ Leonard Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1953): 16.

during the communist experiment.¹⁰ While Husband only briefly links this study to the history of the United States, *Godless Communists* illustrates how historians became engulfed in the almost ubiquitous view that unbelief was distinctly un-American. Atheism was perceived as a foreign phenomenon that was deconstructing traditional family values abroad.¹¹ This resulted in both the inability and unwillingness of American historians to address their own domestic history of anti-religious thought.

This religiously inspired suppression of historical truth has subsided since the mid twentieth-century, as a result of the greater dissemination of scientific information and education. However, it might not be unfounded to suggest that the lingering unpopularity of atheism in American society has contributed to the scarcity of its historical study.

The existing historiography, perhaps even more inexcusably, has failed to account for freethought as a useful historical lens through which to gain a greater understanding of social and cultural norms in antebellum America. The historiographical community of American religious historians must begin to recognize the significance of the role played by unbelief in shaping the philosophical, social, and cultural developments of the nation, as well as to understand more fully the methods of disseminating philosophical and social beliefs to the wider public. This thesis aims to begin to address these historiographical challenges.

¹⁰ William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), xvii.

¹¹ For a study of how Americans perceived the Cold War as a religious war, in which “God had called the United States to defend liberty in the world,” see William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Chapter One addresses the most pervasive medium available to freethinkers attempting to disseminate anti-religious rhetoric: print culture. The *Boston Investigator* partook in the ubiquitous practice of reprinting and acted as the primary means by which atheists could advertise their public gatherings. Newspapers were a necessary gateway leading towards the consumption of more detailed atheistic books.

As Chapter One suggests, freethinkers therefore adopted many of the means of dissemination that had most effectively been used by evangelical religionists. This practice is particularly evident in freethinking sermonizing – the subject of Chapter Two. Notable intellectual freethinkers preached to congregations of like-minded people in services extraordinarily reminiscent of those conducted by churches. Secular hymns most conspicuously illustrate the similarities between religious and irreligious practices. Abner Kneeland, for one, also utilized oral culture in order to defend himself from the charges of blasphemy. He gave public lectures to advertise his arguments on the poisonous influence of religion and further declare his rights to free speech.

Chapter Three explores the relationship between freethought and the growing influence of working-class movements. Indeed, it was within these working classes that atheists were able to recruit the greatest number of supporters. Many of the *Investigator*'s reprinted articles were taken from working-men's periodicals. Social activism – often facilitated through print and oral practices – represented a valuable opportunity for atheists not only to build a greater number of benefactors, but also to show the public that freethinkers were capable of addressing and solving social problems.

Finally, the epilogue seeks to show that the success of the national organization of the "New Atheists" in the twenty-first century owes a great deal to the

tireless work of nineteenth-century individuals and societies. Kneeland and the *Investigator* showed that freethought was a tenable, socially-acceptable position to hold. Without this foundation – often laid in the face of ubiquitous discrimination – Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens would not have experienced the success that can be measured in a growing population of atheists in the United States. Despite the failure of nineteenth-century unbelievers to organize nationally, their ability to raise public consciousness of the atheistic position laid the domestic groundwork for the later careers of Robert Ingersoll, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett. Kneeland and his contemporaries kept freethought on the map of antebellum American religion during a period in which evangelical awakenings – facilitated by print and sermon – made theistic thought particularly socially and culturally dominant.

CHAPTER I

FREETHOUGHT IN PRINT

Atheists in early nineteenth-century America transformed themselves from a clandestine collection of disorganized and disparate individuals into a network of regional, systematized movements capable of competing with the rise of evangelical Christian denominations. Religious skepticism itself was far from new; European enlightenment precedents meant that, as the historian Christopher Grasso has noted, “Clerics had howled in the 1790s about the contagion of infidel philosophy.” However, the nature of this skepticism had developed significantly. “The rare religious skeptic” of the eighteenth-century “tended to be a bewigged gentleman, often socially conservative, who was content to let the rabble have their superstition if it helped them behave.”¹ The public infidel of the early nineteenth century, in contrast, used social and technological developments to “question what had once passed for common sense” through the dissemination of alternate systems of thought. The hegemony of traditional Christian dominance and power was for the first time made the subject of concerted, conspicuously public attacks by skeptical intellectuals and their growing number of followers.

Unsurprisingly, such a radical change did not go unnoticed by the religious public or, more significantly, by the press. The young humanitarian Samuel Gridley Howe published an article in *The New England Magazine* in late 1834 depicting this

¹ Christopher Grasso, “Skepticism and American Faith: Infidels, Converts, and Religious Doubt in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 3 (2002): 480.

rise of anti-religious thought as a force that threatened the very foundations of American society. “The times have sadly changed since the days of our boyhood,” Howe claimed, “or else we are only beginning to open our eyes to the existence of things of which we never then dreamed.”² Indeed, the tenor of this précis on the growing threat to Christian social structures is primarily one of fear and anxiety:

Ten years ago, and who would have foretold that atheism would be fearlessly avowed, and that the doctrine of a God, of revelation, of the divinity of the Savior, of the immortality of the soul, should be publicly denied, nay! held up to ridicule and abuse? But now, we find an extensive party, numbering perhaps fifty thousand, who openly and violently assail Christianity, and attack our system of morals; a party, which employs as its organs five newspapers, sundry periodicals, and whose presses in New-York, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Boston, & c. groan with immense editions of the works of atheistical writers.³

Axiomatically to Howe, the single greatest threat posed by the permeation of poisonous atheistic thought was to be found in antebellum America’s burgeoning print market. Freethought periodicals – the “organs” of the anti-religious movement – worked to explicitly combat the unending efforts of evangelicals to disseminate the word of the Bible to every single American citizen, irrespective of their ability to pay for the receipt of such tracts. A war was breaking out over control of the moral center of society. This was a war fought primarily with the printed word, and it was a war that freethinkers thought they could win.

Howe’s printed attack is a significant indicator of the growing success of the freethought movement in Boston during this period. The explication of loathing perhaps acts as a gauge by which to measure the extent to which freethinkers were

² Samuel Howe, “Atheism in New England,” *The New England Magazine* 7, no. 6 (1834): 500.

³ *Ibid.*, 501.

succeeding in expanding their sphere of influence. In response to a quoted diatribe from an “atheist” whom he chooses not to name, Howe states:

This effusion, from a low-minded, suspicious wretch, who metes to others by his own measure, whose judgement seems corrupted by the foul vapors which come steaming up from the corroded and noxious cauldron of his heart, is signed by his name that we will not hold up, as he perhaps wishes it should be, to give him a notoriety, (though it would be like the notoriety of the felon hung in chains, forcing attention by its offensive odor;) but we will let it rot with the animal whom it designates.⁴

Howe’s use of the term “atheist” suggests a desire to separate “wretches” such as Abner Kneeland and Frances Wright from those skeptics who perhaps posed less of a threat to the moral ligaments of society. “Let us strive,” he commands his readers, “to separate from the body social, such a gangrenous and infecting limb.”⁵ “Atheists,” however, were not only “gangrenous” and “low-minded.” For Howe, they were also unpatriotic, anathema to the sensibilities and principles of the revolutionary generation and abhorrent to the subscribers of the moral standards that made America exceptional. “To the calm contemplative man, who thinks with anxiety about the future condition of the country for which his fathers bled, and which his children are to inhabit,” the conspicuous and “alarming” explosions of irreligion “prove to him the political ignorance, the moral depravity of a large part of the community, and induce him to inquire into the extent of the evil, and seek for its remedies if remedies there be.”⁶

⁴ Ibid., 508.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 501.

To some extent, perceptions of the growth of irreligion facilitated the unification of disparate Christian denominations into a concerted organization of faithful citizens who otherized freethinkers within their society. The historian Eric Schlereth has argued this point within the context of religious controversies, whereby the history of American religion in the antebellum period was defined “along a spectrum of belief and disbelief.” Thus, “infidelity remained central to the ways that American evangelicals defined themselves and their mission well into the nineteenth century.”⁷ In particular, Schlereth cites the previously ignored source of infidel conversion narratives printed by the religious press. These conversions were portrayed as results of the influence of poisonous atheistic rhetoric on poor, weak-minded individuals. Christianity became, to a certain extent, synonymous with hostility to the growing influence of anti-religious thought. Both religious and freethought publications in the early nineteenth century “highlight the degree to which judgments about ultimate religious truth slipped in importance to a modest but more politically effective goal of establishing the public legitimacy of a religious interpretation.”⁸ Religious controversy, facilitated most effectively by the dissemination of rhetoric and arguments in print, was transformed from an intellectual and philosophical phenomenon, to one that had immediate political and social consequences.

Freethinkers shook the foundations of evangelical authority and autonomy through both the content and style of their publications. They utilized artistic forms of expression such as poetry and partook in the pervasive practice of re-printing. The

⁷ Eric Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 10, 169.

⁸ Ibid., 150.

significance of Howe's article becomes clearer when placed within the context of the growing success of the *Boston Investigator*, the longest-lived rationalist periodical of the nineteenth century. Under the editorship of Abner Kneeland for its first decade, the paper evolved from having two hundred and fifty subscribers at its inception in 1831 to over two thousand by 1835. Although the readership fluctuated – sometimes wildly – over the course of the second quarter of the century, “by 1850 the freethought press had declined until only the *Boston Investigator*, the only paper really put on a secure financial basis, was being issued with any degree of regularity.”⁹ The *Free Enquirer* in New York had succumbed to terminal infighting between deists and atheists after only six years of printing. This failure was of particular relevance as New York represented the national center of freethought publishing and was the city where anti-religious thought possessed the most vitality and public support.¹⁰

Indeed, freethought remained an almost exclusively regional movement throughout the nineteenth century. In pre-Darwinian America, as the historian Albert Post has noted, “the attempts to set up national freethought societies were failures because of inertia, lack of funds, the opposition of churches, and factional disputes; there were several thousand subscribers to infidel papers, yet the national societies never mustered more than a few hundred members at most.”¹¹ The printed word therefore represented the sole means by which freethinkers were able to organize to an extent that threatened the growing sphere of influence of Christian churches.

⁹ Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 54, 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

Atheistic sermons and social activism – the subjects of the other chapters of this essay – were of course vital to the achievement of this goal. Yet, the success of these other methods was facilitated entirely by their relationship with the world of publishing. This is exhibited by Howe’s complaint that “attempts are now making to affiliate these societies; and a spirit is breathed through the whole by means of the establishment of newspapers, and the dissemination of infidel tracts and books. The *Boston Investigator* strikes off two thousand impressions weekly, which are eagerly taken up, read, and handed from one to another.”¹²

The sociologist Colin Campbell has suggested that “the irreligious response frequently includes a rejection of ecclesiasticism and sectarianism and so it should not be surprising if the irreligious choose to turn elsewhere than to the churches for their organizational models.”¹³ Yet this is to ignore the essential relationship between religion and the rise of print culture – upon which freethinkers so heavily relied – during the early nineteenth century. This period was represented by radical developments in print and publishing technology, utilized most successfully by the established American churches. The success of the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the Sunday School Union necessitated freethinkers’ entry into this rapidly growing network connected by the printed word.

These groups formed a trinity of religious organizations that for the most part had both the support and resources to fulfill their aims. Bible societies distributed scripture in order to inhibit personal disbelief and inspire piety, whereas tract societies and newspapers “were devoted more heavily to challenging the social and cultural

¹² Howe, “Atheism in New England,” 501.

¹³ Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 43.

sources of personal disbelief.”¹⁴ The historian David Paul Nord has argued that a “free market religious economy” was constructed in the “marketplace of culture” that accompanied the “market revolution” and subsequent “reading revolution.” In the nineteenth century, therefore, “religious organizations clearly were awash in a sea of commerce as well as a sea of faith.”¹⁵ Paradoxically, the managers of the religious societies “made themselves practical businessmen, savvy marketers, large-scale manufacturers, and capitalists in order to save the country from the market revolution.”¹⁶ Freethinkers embarked upon these very same processes partly in order to save the country from the oppression and ignorance of evangelical Christianity. Each side’s increasing production and permeation within the world of print culture only acted to intensify the war of words, exacerbating the inherent social, political, and philosophical tensions between religious and irreligious thought.

The question arises as to whether freethinkers possessed full access to David Nord’s “free market religious economy.” They undoubtedly did, thanks to the Constitution’s devotion to the freedom of speech and, less conspicuously, to the separation of church and state. Freethinkers did not attempt to subvert the pervasive systems of mass media and information dissemination constructed and manipulated by the religious. Rather, they publicly entered the “religious free market economy.” The products of the freethought press, the quality and number of which were facilitated by vastly improved printing techniques, began to be consumed by unprecedented numbers of non-believers over an increasingly inter-connected and

¹⁴ Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 153.

¹⁵ Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

growing network of skeptics. Sermons, music, poetry, and social activism represented the other primary methods utilized by freethinkers. These were necessary steps towards competing with and ultimately subverting faith-based propaganda.

Freethinkers especially appropriated religious lexicons for secular ends, and in doing so hoped to rob evangelicals of their traditional rhetorical strategies. Editions of the *Investigator* frequently contained “A Very Short Sermon” on non-philosophical issues. Such *sermons* included advice on how to avoid debt and how to become physically fit. This was part of a general attempt by unbelievers to utilize familiar religious norms to disseminate anti-religious argument, and became particularly evident in the fields of print, oratory, and social activism. The mirroring of evangelical methods – both the act and art of publishing – enabled unbelievers to integrate their radical thoughts into the common, everyday customs of antebellum society.

The *Investigator* succeeded partially because it transcended the two primary tenets of the atheistic argument as set out by the primary historian of American unbelief, James Turner. Kneeland and his contributors attempted to prove the vacuity and senselessness of a revealed religion that lacked evidence and was anathema to all concepts of common sense. But more than this, they also emphasized the immorality and capriciousness of a religion that aided in the institutionalization of social oppression and was the primary facilitator of the retarding of social advancement. This largely took the form of articles pertaining to the greatest social issues faced in antebellum America, such as slavery and women’s rights, which will be the subject of a later chapter. Other, smaller issues also enabled the *Investigator* to appear more relevant to the everyday life of its reader. In response to the enforcement of the Sabbath in Boston, the *Investigator* complained that the closing of the railroad on

Sunday prevented the vast majority of people “who earned a living by the sweat of their brow” from engaging in leisurely activities on that day. Indeed, Kneeland suggests that the Church had appropriated the Sabbath purely for its material needs: “we (Infidels) are not the only persons who see enough the monopolizing schemes of the Orthodox, who want the first day of the week guaranteed to them by law, exclusively to sell their merchandise – to peddle out their dreams of fanaticism, and chimeras of imagination. But the people (and we are glad to see it) are becoming wide awake.”¹⁷ In the same paper, an article bemoans that “a Gentleman from the State of Maine has recently been obliged to put his wife in the Insane Hospital, in a state of mental derangement occasioned by religious excitement.” This story – “Another Victim of Religious Fanaticism” – is further evidence of the necessary relationship between an engagement with social issues and the success of the freethought press. This has been best articulated by the historian Christopher Grasso:

Religious skepticism was not a sin, a mistake, or an embarrassment, and it was more than an intellectual mechanism that would distill a purer form of faith. Doubt was a psychological declaration of independence and a weapon to wield against the tyranny of organized religion. It was also the wedge that opened up the possibilities of free inquiry; free inquiry, in turn, led to the establishment of rational knowledge, which was the foundation of human progress.¹⁸

Just as national history has often been characterized by the concept of the “Other,” so can this historical construction be applied to Christian and, in this case, irreligious thought. As has been noted, the New York *Free Enquirer* suffered a terminal decline due to internal conflict between its atheistic and deistic benefactors.

¹⁷ *Boston Investigator* October 21, 1831.

¹⁸ Grasso, “Skepticism and American Faith,” 508.

Kneeland and the *Investigator* perhaps avoided this pitfall not only because Kneeland himself held almost exclusive editorial power, but also because the periodical was able to portray the Christian Church as the 'Other' in American society, against which all freethinkers must unite. It is in this context that the *Investigator's* explication of social issues and the ways in which religion had facilitated oppression appears most important.

This has, historically, presented one of the greatest limitations for American freethought. Colin Campbell has noted that for American atheists, because there was no official state church to serve as a primary target, national or even regional organization was far more problematic than it was in Europe, where theocratic history provided such a conspicuous and ubiquitously known enemy. "Unlike their brothers in blasphemy in Europe," he notes, "the free-thinkers in America did not have to suffer persecution and imprisonment for the right to express their views through speech and the printed word."¹⁹ Campbell concludes that unbelievers struggled to organize nationally because they had too much freedom: "ironically enough, it was the very same conditions which appeared to favor the growth of secularism in America which in fact worked against a strong and influential movement." Ultimately, "the secularists would have benefited from the sort of official persecution and opposition which they experienced in Britain, and they would certainly have benefited from the existence of a state Church in that there would then have been a real possibility of uniting radical, political and theological opinion."²⁰

¹⁹ Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

It is undoubtedly true that American freethinkers failed to organize on a scale equivalent to those with similar skeptical beliefs in the Old World. Nevertheless, Campbell's conclusions fail to acknowledge the regional organization accomplished primarily through publications such as the *Investigator*. In a local context, anti-religious thought made significant progress in the early nineteenth century.

The *Investigator*'s fair-mindedness – not to be confused with objectivity – in its editorial choices concerning which contributed articles to print is one of the most significant reasons for its longevity. The period during Kneeland's tenure in particular is characterized by an explicit willingness to engage in debates with detractors, a process which necessitated the full publication of letters often wholly antithetical to the principles of the *Investigator* and its readership. A Christian woman who apparently received a copy of the *Investigator* by accident responded with a letter to the paper, stating that “when we wish to learn anything of the principles you advocate, we can go into the grog-shops, houses of ill-fame, and other dens of infamy, and there have a true specimen of your principles ... You will, when you come upon your dying bed, want the bible to sustain your sinking soul.”²¹ Further, Kneeland made explicit attempts to “give his auditors and his readers a sense of belonging to a movement that had roots in the American Revolutionary experience and that was linked with international progressive tendencies.” In order to accomplish this, he frequently cited extremely lengthy articles and submitted letters from both members of the public and other noted freethought intellectuals, such as Frances Wright.²²

²¹ *Boston Investigator* April 13, 1832.

²² Roderick French, “Liberation from Man and God in Boston: Abner Kneeland's Free-Thought Campaign 1830-1839,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1980): 210.

Historicizing the freethought movement through links to the deistic traditions of the Revolution particularly enabled Kneeland to project anti-religious thought as an American, rather than foreign, concept. The historian Gordon Wood has showed that the American Revolution was, contrary to much scholarship and popular opinion, a radically ideological event. Americans, he argues, found “new democratic adhesives in the actual behavior of plain ordinary people.” Enlightenment ideals of republicanism – many of which were suspicious of traditional Christianity – created a popular disapproval of absolute authority, both in the political and social spheres of American society.²³ Indeed, the revolutionaries’ aim had been to rid government of “private interest” which, for freethinkers, included religion. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, for example, the *Investigator* published numerous letters and editorial columns defending the right of American citizens to do whatever they wished on a Sunday. For freethinkers, the evangelical defense of the Sabbath as a day for worship was antithetical to the secular principles of the Republic. Richard John has described how Sabbatarians attempted to influence the legislature in order to prevent the publication of newspapers on Sundays.²⁴ It might be more than coincidence, therefore, that freethought meetings advertised in the *Investigator* made the conscious choice to meet on the Sabbath. By mirroring Christian activities, such as Sunday meetings, freethinkers undermined the authority of religion on political and social issues.

Kneeland and the *Investigator* also shared in the practice of reprinting, which was pervasive in the antebellum print market. As Meredith McGill has argued, “unauthorized reprinting was so widely practiced in this period that the designation of

²³ Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2002), ix, 247.

²⁴ Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

a poem, article, or tale as an “original” referred not to the quality of its contents, but to the fact that the book or periodical in which it appeared was the site of its first printing.” This practice was not illegal, but rather represented a “cultural norm.”²⁵ McGill particularly notes that “those who explicitly defended the culture of reprinting maintained that it operated as a hedge against the concentration of economic and political power.”²⁶ Religious power should be added to this list. While the *Investigator* consisted primarily of original editorials and letters written to the periodical itself, it also frequently published materials from other, mainly freethought or working-men’s publications. Unlike in the antebellum literary world, however, the *Investigator* had little to gain by claiming to be the original publisher of such pieces, when reprinting articles from, for example, the *Free Inquirer* or *The Working Man’s Advocate* (it is therefore somewhat ironic that Kneeland’s trial and conviction for blasphemy, which will be explicated in the next chapter, were based on a reprinted article from the New York *Free Inquirer*).²⁷ The exception to this rule, however, is evident in the *Investigator*’s poetry section – one that remained a constant in the periodical throughout its long history. These poems were not explicitly anti-religious, but rather attempted to emphasize the importance of the concepts of “truth” and “freedom,” in contrast to the superstition of the religious. Kneeland’s decision to reprint poems without citing their original authors illustrates a recognition on his part that, in order for the *Investigator* to experience success, it must appeal to the numerous artistic sensibilities of his readers. Other freethought periodicals did not

²⁵ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Levy, “Satan’s Last Apostle in Massachusetts,” 19.

provide the range of content and style that were available in the *Investigator*, and often paid the price.

The fact that many of the *Investigator*'s wealthy proprietors and donors chose to remain anonymous illustrates the inherent class issues surrounding the freethought press during this period. Their anonymity means that historians have little chance of uncovering these individuals' true motives, but it may be suggested that to appear as a benefactor of a periodical perceived to be primarily aimed at the working man might have resulted in as much damage to one's social status as if one were to appear as a supporter of anti-religious freethought. Nevertheless, these proprietors, as well as the subscription payments of the readers, acted to provide a sound financial basis for the paper; such a secure foundation was very rarely available to other freethought publications. Fiscal stability was not the primary reason for the *Investigator*'s success, but it was a necessary prerequisite.

The relationship between skepticism and numerous specific aspects of American society as a whole was inescapable. This relationship was conspicuous throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and is particularly evident in the Prospectus of the *Investigator* in 1850:

Our past course must be a guarantee for the future and we shall, to the best of our ability and means, seek to open the public mind to the discussion of those vital questions of reform which affect the welfare of man.

We hold that religious bondage is unworthy of the human mind, and in place of it we shall strive to substitute the empire of reason and enlightened self-interest.

We hold religious fear to be a base, degrading restraint upon the human will, and in place of it would substitute the true manly motive, the love of virtue and right for their own merits.

We hold the present wanton expenditure of capital in religious fanaticism and profligacy to be inconsistent, criminal, worse than useless, and in place of it would substitute a systematic course of benevolence and universal education.

We hold that LABOR should be emancipated from its present degrading vassalage to *Capital*, that all *Legislation* in favour of *Capital* and against LABOR should be immediately rescinded.

We hold that the present system of *Banking* and *Landholding* constitute two of the most accursed Monopolies that were ever invented to defraud the labouring classes of “wealth, liberty, and life.”

We hold that the Bible, being the source of religious faiths is also the source of the social abuses which now hang like a millstone upon the neck of society, and that there will be no social concord, no true principle of fraternity in society while one class are *set up* as God’s elect, and another *set down* as God’s vilest reprobates.

We hold that society can never be entirely purged of its abuses, of its monopolies, of its cruel and despotic customs, until the Bible and its slave-holding, man-debasing, rum-distilling, war-sanctioning, and gallows-blessing churches are cast together into the sea-of *oblivion*.

...

While we anticipate the usual course of pecuniary trial and embarrassment, if we can continue the publication of the INVESTIGATOR until it is beyond the reach of persecution, and the need of charity, we shall never cease to rejoice that we have shared that morning of doubt and darkness which have ended in so glorious a day of certain success and prosperity.²⁸

The emphasis on labor again enabled Kneeland to draw parallels between the freethought movement and the legacy of the American Revolution, thereby linking unbelief with patriotism. As Wood writes, the Revolution had turned labor into “a universal badge of honor,” whereby “working in some useful occupation was widely regarded as the new source of fame” in the nineteenth century.²⁹ Religious encroachment “restrained” man’s will to labor for himself and for his family, limiting his ability to enact the revolutionary principle of “virtue.” The “criminal” expenditure of capital “in religious fanaticism” was, therefore, essentially undemocratic and contrary to the values of labor and emancipation established in the late eighteenth-

²⁸ *Boston Investigator* December 14, 1850.

²⁹ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 278-283.

century. While freethinkers could not hope to succeed in directly changing the private beliefs of individual Americans, they could succeed by publicizing the ways in which evangelical encroachments on free society prevented the fulfillment of revolutionary principles.

Periodicals not only enabled freethinkers to disseminate their arguments and complaints against the oppression of religiosity on free society; they also acted as a means to maintain morale and to illustrate the advancements of the movement. Without the *Investigator*, members of the anti-religious community in New England would have had no means of gauging the extent to which their work was influencing the religious hierarchy.

The radical thinkers of the freethought movement – and they certainly were radical – chose to use conservative methods, many of which had been adopted by the evangelical sects of the Christian Church, in order to facilitate the survival and continuing permeation of their agenda within nineteenth-century American society. These methods did not change significantly between 1825 and 1850; rather, they represent a thorough and sweeping reconstruction of the American freethought movement from the disparate deistic remnants of the eighteenth-century. Indeed, the lack of change during this particular period of study is itself significant. Boston's irreligious community, led effectively by the untiring work of Abner Kneeland in the 1830s, experienced unprecedented success in publicizing their efforts to undermine the established religious hierarchy. Although this group of Bostonians lacked the national reputation of New York free inquirers or the public renown of Robert Ingersoll and his devotees later in the century, they manipulated the "religious free market economy" to their advantage. Ironically, the machinery established by

evangelicals partly to address their growing perceptions of thriving heresy and infidelity only served to facilitate the increased organization of irreligious communities. Infidels did not, of course, succeed in ridding the United States of the oppressive hegemony of the Church; to be a person of faith is even today to command respect in society, largely immune to ridicule and questioning. Nevertheless, the brave devotion of these freethinkers to their principles, often in the face of social contempt, laid the foundations for the global success of the “New Atheism” of the twenty-first century. Such success still is to be primarily found in the printed word. As George Orwell noted, “speaking the truth in times of universal deceit is a revolutionary act.” Boston’s freethinkers spoke their version of the truth largely by printing it, despite the ubiquitous opposition of what they perceived to be the universally deceitful work of the religious press.

CHAPTER II

FREETHOUGHT AND ORATORICAL CULTURE

Mass printing unquestionably was the primary strategy appropriated by Bostonian freethinkers in the early nineteenth century. Periodicals could be and were used to geographically and numerically extend the freethought network, advertise the availability of longer, more comprehensively argued anti-religious texts, and engage with pervasive cultural trends in order to make freethought more appealing and more accessible. This mirroring of the media used by religious denominations was even more evident, however, in freethinkers' participation in early nineteenth-century American oral culture. The delivery and performance, as well as language and content, of freethought argument ultimately dictated the ways in which Kneeland and others attempted to undermine the social hegemony of religion. There was, therefore, a reciprocal relationship between the oral and print cultures utilized by freethinkers; each depended heavily upon the other in order to facilitate the continuing growth and development of the movement.

Notable speakers within the freethought movement borrowed the structure and rhetoric of contemporary religious sermons when delivering their orations. Boston in particular attracted a number of well-known skeptics during this period, including Kneeland, Robert Owen, and Frances Wright. These events truly were *sermons*, delivered to a *congregation* of unbelievers. Borrowing religious language so explicitly illuminates clearly the desire to organize based on the model of the church. Freethinkers often abhorred the content and language of religious arguments, but they

fully recognized – and perhaps even admired – the specific ways that Christian churches propagated their messages. In this way, freethinkers utilized conservative means for radical ends.

Even more surprisingly, freethinkers appropriated the social influence of the hymn. Abner Kneeland published numerous editions of a collection of hymns for the unbeliever. These expounded the primacy of truth in human morality and human society, and suggested that superstition and faith were two of the most damaging tenets of nineteenth-century American life. As in the fields of print and oration, these hymns illustrate a transparent strategy on behalf of freethinkers to facilitate greater organization – and therefore to engage religious authority on a much broader front – by using the very strategies that had helped to construct that religious authority in the first place.

Oratorical culture required social gatherings, and social gatherings required organization. The sociologist Colin Campbell has shown that “the long tradition of associating religion with the integration of society has naturally created a predisposition to associate irreligion with a lack of integration and hence with individualism.” Contrary to this stereotype, irreligion appeared “organized in social movements of protest, reform or propaganda.”¹ Freethinkers’ incorporation into antebellum oral culture shows that individual unbelief and freethought organization were far from mutually exclusive. The antireligious movement required a select group of prominent freethinkers to act as spearheads against the religious hierarchy. But more importantly, these individuals acted to establish a closely-knit community of unbelievers, whose combined voices would serve as the greatest propagators of

¹ Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, 39-40.

freethought. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran have argued that the early nineteenth century represented a transformative period in the history of oratory in America. Oratorical culture began to challenge “the traditional principle of collective moral authority by establishing as a new principle the moral authority of the individual.” This “authority of the individual,” they note, “was itself transformed by the political and economic complexities of a rapidly expanding nation into the authority of the expert.”² This transition benefited freethinkers in two ways. Firstly, new conceptions of the moral autonomy of the individual strengthened freethinkers’ claims that organized religion was unnecessary for and, in many cases, antithetical to the maintenance of an ethical society. Secondly, this growth of perceptions of individual speakers as experts enabled some freethinkers to become public intellectuals who could command more authority from their secular pulpits. Ultimately, Kneeland, Wright, Owen, and others became atheistic priests, sermonizing to congregations of freethinkers. Organization requires leadership, and freethinkers modelled their hierarchical structure on the very institutions that they wished to destroy.

Within the commonly accepted paradigm of the atheist as an individual incapable of full integration into American society, it is tempting to suggest that freethinking orators in the early nineteenth century conformed to the stereotypical role of the itinerant lecturer. The historian James Warren has described such individuals as social “agitators” – outsiders who occupied “an independent, unentangled space, defined as utterly necessary for democratic freedom.”³ Kneeland was certainly an

² Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 3.

agitator, one who attempted to throw the established religious governance of society into turmoil. He certainly was not, however, “unentangled” from such a society. Rather, his tenure in Boston was a period of concerted growth for a freethought community. Regular meetings, facilitated by print media, provided freethinkers with both an ideological and geographical base from which to expand.

Preaching and sermonizing were particularly prevalent in New England, and more specifically in the urban center of Boston. Warren notes that “the Congregational focus on the sermon delivered by an educated minister” in New England “relates directly to the training in colleges, for many of the college-bred men of the early nineteenth century would become preachers.”⁴ Thus, the power of oratory “resides in the dynamism of an individual speaker, their belief in the power of speech to lead their audiences toward moral truths and ethical actions, and the evangelical fervor with which they practiced their beliefs.”⁵ Kneeland manipulated the specific oratory traits of New England to the advantage of the freethought movement.

The “First Society of Free Enquirers” was founded in Boston in 1830, probably as a result of the growing influence of Frances Wright, who was conducting a lecture tour at this time. Kneeland was invited to Boston by the society and fulfilled the official position of lecturer at an annual salary of five hundred dollars. This was a comfortable salary, but it did not represent significantly greater earnings than the average unskilled workman in Boston.⁶ Kneeland had not moved from New York to

³ James Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

make a better financial living for himself, but rather to disseminate genuine ideological principles to the people of Boston.

Shortly after Kneeland's arrival in 1831, he inaugurated Sunday lectures in order to fulfil the society's aims for the "acquirement and diffusion of useful knowledge, and the education of our children, without regard to religious opinions, orthodoxies, or creeds."⁷ The regular performance of these antireligious sermons, unsurprisingly, was not welcomed by many Bostonians. The services took place at Julien Hall until 1834. This was located in the heart of the financial district of South Boston, on the corner of Congress Street and Milk Street. During these years, therefore, freethought meetings were publically conspicuous events which the city's citizens would have found difficult to ignore. The observance by outsiders of a concerted freethought community was, for its members, just as important as participation within the organization itself. In 1834, however, the landlords of Julien Hall submitted to popular and public demands for the ejection of the Kneelandites. These gatherings also drew the attention of the media; *Zion's Herald* – a Methodist periodical – published an article suggesting the freethinkers were being "driven from pillar to post" due to the general "detestation of vice" and "loathing of sentiments repugnant to the social, civil and political happiness of society."⁸

⁶ Between 1830 and 1832, for example, the daily wage of a carpenter was \$1.45, and just less than a dollar for cotton and wool manufacturers. See Stanley Lebergott, "Wage Trends, 1800-1900" in *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1960). <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c2486.pdf>. Accessed April 28, 2013.

⁷ *Boston Investigator* February 4, 1831.

⁸ *Zion's Herald* cited in *Boston Investigator* January 5, 1835. The reprinting of this article by the *Investigator* is further evidence of Kneeland's willingness to publish arguments against the principles and actions of the freethought movement.

Such resistance was also apparent, often more so than in Boston, during Kneeland's visits to other New England towns and cities. The *Investigator* noted that little public notice was given locally for a sermon that Kneeland was to deliver in Rhode Island. This was, the paper argued, due both to the obvious infidelity of his arguments and to freethinkers' support for the working-men's movement. Even with limited advertisement, however, such events were always claimed by the *Investigator* to have been extremely successful: "We sold and distributed a number of liberal books, pamphlets, and other tracts; and, in addition to our lectures, read lessons from the Bible of Reason, and a number of our National Hymns, with which the people seemed to be edified and highly pleased, as well as instructed."⁹ Freethinkers perceived their beliefs as inherently *liberal*, as they opposed the political and social oppression of religion through claims to rights to free speech. Despite their appeal to conservative methods, the goals of freethinkers remained – in the context of early nineteenth-century evangelical revivalism – radically liberal.

The *Boston Investigator* advertised the weekly lectures given by Kneeland and others in every edition. These were public events that exerted influence far beyond the theatre hall. Kneeland often used these gatherings as a means of selling the vast array of secular literature offered by the *Investigator* as well as to sign up subscribers to the weekly periodical. Each, they hoped, would add further links to the growing network of freethinkers across Boston and into the rest of the nation.

Ultimately, the "First Society" did not experience the same longevity in practice as the *Boston Investigator* did in print, probably because of the loss of Kneeland as a focal organizational point following his migration to Iowa in the late 1830s. Importantly, Kneeland's sermonizing and publishing career did not go

⁹ *Boston Investigator* April 20, 1832.

unpunished. In 1834, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts charged him with three counts of blasphemy based upon articles in the *Investigator*. The indictment specifically cited articles which questioned the Immaculate Conception, ridiculed prayer, and described the Universalists' faith as "a chimera of their own imagination." Thus, Kneeland had committed numerous counts of blasphemy, defined by the prosecuting judge as:

speaking evil of the Deity with an impious purpose to derogate from the divine majesty, and to alienate the minds of others from the love and reverence of God. It is purposely using words concerning God, calculated and designed to impair and destroy the reverence, respect, and confidence due to him. ... It is a wilful and malicious attempt to lessen men's reverence of God.¹⁰

The trial of Kneeland therefore had just as much to do with his methods of disseminating freethought rhetoric as it did with his unbelief.

The trial serves as an historical lens into both official and popular reactions to freethought in antebellum America. Naturally, Kneeland used both his editorial vocation and oratory skills to defend himself. Indeed, although hugely inconvenient to him, the trial may have served as evidence that Kneeland's appropriation of religious methods was having an impact upon the religious hierarchy. The historian Leonard Levy has noted that Kneeland's writings and speeches were "evidence enough for the state that the flag of atheism had been planted in its midst."¹¹ This was a conclusion in

¹⁰ Leonard Levy, *Blasphemy in Massachusetts: Freedom of Conscience and the Abner Kneeland Case, A Documentary Record* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), xvi.

which Kneeland would have taken great pleasure. Kneeland's reactions to the trial explicitly referenced the significance of both print and oral culture. He attempted to use the public trial to further publicize the oppressive tendencies of religion. "It must be congratulating to every Free Enquirer," he wrote in a letter published in the *Investigator*, "to see the effect which this prosecution has had thus far; and the longer the public mind is agitated with it, the worse it will be for priestcraft, and the better it will be for the cause of free enquiry."¹² He further boasted in his defence that the Free Enquirers had obtained a larger venue – the Boston Theatre, in Federal Street – for their freethought meetings. Kneeland continued with his strategies of information dissemination even while he was under judicial scrutiny for such actions.

After news of the blasphemy trial spread, freethinking individuals and societies rallied to support their persecuted hero. The *Investigator* in early 1834, following the first trial, contained weekly summaries of donations and letters of sympathy under the headline "The Persecution Fund." One letter stated, "We look upon you as a martyr to the cause, inasmuch as we believe that you were selected to make an example of, to frighten others ..." According to this subscriber, Kneeland was being "harassed ... for the expression of a mere matter of opinion." In many ways, the commonwealth's decision to prosecute Kneeland had backfired; he became a public figure around which unbelievers could unify and who they could cite as an example of theocratic encroachment on free speech.¹³

¹¹ Ibid., ix.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ *Boston Investigator* March 21, 1834. Cited in Roderick French, *The Trials of Abner Kneeland: A Study in the Rejection of Democratic Secular Humanism*, PhD dissertation, George Washington University, 1971.

Ultimately, however, Kneeland became disconcerted by the nature and long-windedness of his trial, with an eventual conviction and sentencing for blasphemy, a process that dragged out over four years. He then decided to follow in the footsteps of Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen and attempt to set up a freethinking, utopian community in Iowa.¹⁴ In place of the "First Society," a new organization was established, the "Boston Free Discussion Society." Part of this transition was the increased frequency of more informal social gatherings. The Society occasionally held festivals, celebrations, or social assemblies. The entertainments at these events included intellectual exercises, music, and dancing.¹⁵ The integration of formal with informal oratorical culture facilitated freethinkers' own integration into what was perceived as traditional American society.

Significantly, the most comprehensive description of freethought sermons was provided by the Christian humanitarian Samuel Howe in his anxious response to the growing influence of the anti-religious movement in New England. His description explicitly illustrates the modelling of these sermons on those of the church, and the effect that this had on observers:

The old Federal-street Theatre has been prepared, and dedicated as a Temple of Reason; the pit has been floored over, on a level, with the stage; in the centre is a pulpit, and in the rear of this, flanking it on both sides, and extending across the stage, are the seats for the singers. The pulpit is hung with black; on the front are inscribed, in Greek characters, KNOW THYSELF; and on the

¹⁴ This community, like all other freethought attempts, ultimately failed. For a study of Kneeland's later career and Salubria, see Mary Whitcomb, "Abner Kneeland: His Role in Early Iowa History," *Annals of Iowa* (April, 1904).

¹⁵ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 109.

drapery overhead is inscribed, in flaming letters,
HE THAT WILL NOT REASON IS A BIGOT;
HE THAT CANNOT REASON IS AN IDIOT;
HE THAT DARES NOT REASON, IS A SLAVE.

The very fact of the services being held on a Sunday was perceived as a means of causing offense:

On the Sabbath, as if in mockery of those who assemble for Christian worship, the doors of this temple are thrown open, and the congregation begins to collect; the boxes are occupied, and marked as private pews; the seats in the pit fill up promiscuously with men and women, and, when the church-bells cease tolling, the services commence. First, the minister rises, and invites the attention of the congregation to the singing of a hymn, which he reads, say the 97th hymn. The music strikes up a waltz, perhaps, or some quick tune ...¹⁶

Whether the use of church sermons as models was meant in ironic mockery, or to simply use a format with which many members of the audience would have been familiar, it had a profound effect on both the participants and observers of these meetings. Through these methods, Kneeland succeeded in showing that freethought was not an individualistic, immoral ideology. Rather, unbelief should and could provide the foundations for a comprehensively integrated, moral society, free from the social oppression that had resulted largely from the dominance of religion.

Kneeland's *National Hymns, Original and Selected, for the Use of those who are "Slave to no Sect"* went through a number of editions, illustrating the hymnal's

¹⁶ Howe, "Atheism in New England," 503-504.

popularity within the freethought community. The first edition went through four printings, the second three, the third two, and the fourth one. The hymns included were “calculated to suit the growing taste for this kind of music; ever keeping the moral, the liberal, and the patriotic feeling and sentiment above bigotry, superstition and intolerance.”¹⁷ The oppression of Christianity was made even worse by evangelical claims that religious revivalism was the only available path toward social happiness. Religious claims of social cohesiveness and equality were bigoted in the context of their narrow definitions of those who were to be “saved.” Many Christians were therefore camouflaging their conservative views behind a mask of liberality and progressiveness. The very first hymn in this collection illustrates the tenor of these freethought principles:

A conscious fortitude sustains
The heart of him who guile disdains:
Firm on a rock his faith builds,
Which to no storm or tempest yields; -
He builds on Truth, whence every joy
Is lasting, free from all alloy.

Shall servile imitation's smile,
Us of this fortitude beguile?
And, led by custom, vision's prize,
While truth must seem little in our
eyes?
It must not be, vain dreams be gone!
Oh, give us Truth, and Truth alone.

'Tis truth from error purifies;
While vice but borrows error's guise;
With dazzling show to lure the sight,
And make what's wrong seem what is
right;
But Truth and Virtue seek no aid, -

¹⁷ Abner Kneeland, *National Hymns, Original and Selected, For the Use of Those Who Are "Slaves to no Sect"* (Boston: Boston Investigator, 1834), vi.

Both best in “NATIVE WORTH”
array’d.¹⁸

Some of the concepts alluded to in this hymn were designed to answer some of the most common criticisms faced by infidels. Despite popular stereotypes, freethinkers were capable of feeling emotional enjoyment and admiring the aesthetic qualities of the world, without the need to appeal to the supernatural. Truth and virtue provide a “dazzling show to lure the sight” and provide every lasting “joy” felt by man. This is an essentially humanitarian message, drawing on man’s actions towards other men, rather than towards a deity. Most significantly, this devotion to truth is shown best in “Native worth.” This is probably a reference to the philosophical definition of nativism, which states that human thoughts are not derived from external – in this case, theistic – sources. Thus, the freethinker’s conscious appeal to truth supported the claims of unbelievers to offer better solutions to contemporary social issues.

What did freethinkers hope to achieve through the performance of hymns? Communal organization was to be facilitated by large-scale participation in specific cultural activities. American atheists certainly lacked an official state church against which to unite, but to compensate for the absence of a single, conspicuous institutional antagonist, they appropriated religious organizational strategies. Hymns of course did not incorporate the same worshipful meanings as for most Christians, but repeated confirmation of a devotion to truth and rational discourse and enquiry through the performance of music perhaps served as a frequent reminder of the central principles for which freethinkers were fighting.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

Many hymns – and there were hundreds within Kneeland’s hymnal – contained explicit attacks on the ignorance of religion, and contained optimistic messages about the “reign” of peace and science:

The land of freedom, Hail!
Where peace and science reign;
Where love and truth prevail,
Harmonious in their train.
Where foolish dreams no longer charm,
Nor fears of hell excite alarm.

Where reason takes the lead,
The mind in peace pursues;
Examines well each deed,
The good alone will choose,
“For modes of faith let others fight;
“His cannot be wrong whose life is right.”

Wherever sordid priests,
Their angry gods uphold;
Their ignorant flocks they fleece,
And barter faith for gold.
Instead of truth they visions give,
And for their visions gold receive.

Hold! hold! your day is o’er!
With us the mind is free;
We will be slaves no more,
Nor sell our liberty!
With heart and hand, we’ll meet and sing,
And make our land with freedom ring.¹⁹

A theme exhibited here is continued throughout the collection, namely, the replacement of God with Truth (with a capital T). Truth is something to be praised, something to be worshipped, and something which should be applied to all aspects of life. Truth *alone* is the key to understanding man’s place in the world; superstition, dogma, and faith are all unnecessary projections of wish fulfilment and a hunger for power that acted explicitly to retard man’s ability to discover what is true. Indeed,

¹⁹ Ibid., “Land of Freedom,” 65-66.

truth is the source of all *joy* and enjoyment. There was only a single truth, which incorporated all of the freethinkers' scientific knowledge and beliefs about social harmony. Within the unbeliever's "land of freedom," love and truth are presented as synonymous, thereby lending this single "truth" a communal definition. Such messages – vital to the freethinker – were expounded communally through these hymns.

Thus, these hymns transcend the two aspects of unbelief expounded by James Turner – both the intellectual crisis and social abhorrence of organized religion. "Sordid" priests bartered "faith for gold," facilitated by "visions" that were antithetical to reasoned and observed truth. The ability of freethinkers to include such a range of anti-religious propaganda, even within the verses of a single hymn, justified the appropriation of this peculiarly religious activity.

To facilitate familiarity with and inclusion in the singing of hymns, many were set to the sheet music of nationally recognizable anthems, such as "Auld Lang Syne" and "Rule Britannia."²⁰ The appropriation of well-known music for secular ends represents only a small part of this wider pattern of the permeation of existing social norms into freethought practices. The volume of hymns further allowed freethinkers to address specific social and scientific issues through music, as well as the wider philosophical relationship between religion and Truth. The relationship between patriotism and the desire for truth – illustrated, for example, by the hymns set to "Auld Lang Syne" and, ironically, "Rule Britannia" – was an explicit attempt to paint freethought as an American, rather than foreign, ideology. These hymns contained verses with links to America's past and their separation from European oppression: "Hail, great Republic of the world, The rising Empire of the West; Where

²⁰ Ibid., 59, 80.

famed Columbus, with mighty mind inspir'd, Gave tortured Europe scenes of rest.” The chorus – “Be thou forever, for ever great and free, The Land of Love and Liberty” – extols the Revolutionary principles with which Kneeland helped to define freethought.

The relationship between secular and religious hymns is, however, more complex than simply the replacement of specific words. The historian Stephen Marini has written that “beliefs expressed through mythical language add an explicitly sacred conceptual dimension to music’s protean emotional power. By naming the sacred powers, articulating the sacred cosmos, and disclosing how sacrality interacts with humanity, verbalized beliefs specify sacred content in a way that music alone cannot.” Marini quotes David Welsh – another historian of music – when he writes that “chant is poetry organized by both the internal rhythms of language and the external rhythms of music.” Thus, chants are “words that act as myth on the social and communal level, aided by the driving force of music.” The music itself, then, is only a catalyst – a necessary but separate part of the wider meaning of the communal singing of a hymn.²¹

Marini notes that the hymn – the earliest musical form known to cultural history – was defined by St. Augustine as “a song of praise to God.” Kneeland’s appropriation of the hymn – both the action and the word itself – is therefore particularly revealing of the freethinker’s mindset. In order to represent a truly religious ritual, both the language of a hymn and the communal action of its performance must meet set standards of “sacred intentionality.” Symbolism and ritual, as well as the written words, therefore together conveyed the true meaning of the

²¹ Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 5-7.

performance of a hymn in a religious context. The very same principles were utilized by freethinkers in Boston.

Beyond the issue of meanings conveyed by religious and secular music, Marini has shown that hymns – just like periodicals and books – represented *commodities* to be consumed. Marini argues this point in the context of contemporary new media, such as television and the internet. However, the general point is applicable to the early nineteenth century. Kneeland's publication of his secular hymn book utilized new media – the vastly improved mass print technology – and provided a further revenue fund for the *Investigator*.²²

Freethought hymns are in essence much more closely related to religious hymns than they are to, for example, national anthems. This is due to the necessarily homogenous nature of the audience; the absence of a pluralism in faith beliefs – both for freethinking and specific Christian denominational audiences – was a necessary prerequisite for the performance of music that addressed faith issues. It is of course not possible to understand fully what it meant for freethinkers to sing secular hymns in a communal setting. However, the social and cultural value that resulted from engaging in group activities with people of the same beliefs has been the subject of a number of studies, particularly in the context of religion, which can justifiably be applied to these freethought gatherings in Boston.

The writing and publication of secular hymns was certainly significant, but the performance of such hymns at secular services truly exposes the mind-set of the early nineteenth-century freethought community. Religious services were at once something to be abhorred and appropriated. The preaching of ignorant dogma was poisonous for American society, yet the way in which such dogma was articulated and

²² See Nord, *Faith in Reading*.

disseminated was something to be copied. Freethinkers were essentially playing the religious at their own game.

Ultimately, as the historian William Brigance writes in the first comprehensive study of American public address, history is not only written with words, “it is made with words. Most of the mighty movements affecting the destiny of the American nation have gathered strength in obscure places from the talk of nameless men.”²³ Abner Kneeland has been largely nameless for American historians, yet his sermonizing and appropriation of other specifically religious actions deserve recognition in social and cultural, as well as philosophical history. As Roderick French, one of Kneeland’s few biographers, has noted, Kneeland “must be regarded as this country’s outstanding indigenous freethinker between the generations of Jefferson and Ingersoll.”²⁴ However, such freethought only gained significance in the context of the communal power that he engendered in Boston’s unbelievers. The lone voice of disparate freethinkers only served to entrench the negative stereotypes of infidels disseminated by evangelical printers and orators. In contrast, freethinkers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century were able to portray themselves as a socially active, organized community.

This chapter has therefore aimed to address the complicated relationship between the individual and the community in the context of anti-religious activity. Intellectual ideas about the individual – which often mirrored transcendentalist ideology – called for the emancipation of the minds of individual men and women

²³ William Brigance (ed.), *A History and Criticism of American Public Address* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), vii.

²⁴ French, “Liberation from Man and God,” 221.

from coercive systems of thought. For freethinkers, such emancipation only made sense within a communal setting. By adopting conservative religious tactics, unbelievers necessarily required greater social organization. Sermons and hymns represented individual and communal aspects of oratorical culture. Yet neither held meaning for an individual separated from the freethought community. The desired aims of freedom from religious hegemony were only to be achieved through collective actions and experiences, facilitated by shared exposure to freethought arguments through the printed and spoken word.

Albert Post has commented that “freethinkers could devise no better means of propaganda than the missionary; the itinerant, travelling from place to place to lecture and to sow the seeds of infidelity, threw terror into the clergy and the church.”²⁵ Yet the example of Kneeland shows that many individuals were much more than itinerant speakers; during his time in Boston, Kneeland established a tight-knit *community* of unbelievers. These original precedents of organization set the foundations for modern global atheism which is centered in the United States.

²⁵ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 141.

CHAPTER III

FREETHOUGHT AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Freethought print and oratory accomplished much more than just the dissemination of philosophical and intellectual arguments against the theistic position. Writing and speaking about religion in a social context enabled atheists to challenge not only the accepted stereotype of religion as the moral arbiter of society, but also the categorization of irreligion as immoral and socially dangerous. Boston's freethinkers – largely under the guidance of Kneeland and the *Investigator* – had socially relevant reasons for engaging in specific social issues. Kneeland's paper "advocated universal education, equal rights for women, liberal divorce laws, and electoral, tax, and legal reforms; it supported the laboring and producing class, condemned monopolies, and initially called for the abolition of slavery."¹ Yet, perhaps more important for this embryonic irreligious community, social activism represented another method by which the communal freethought network could be extended. In particular, freethinkers addressed social concerns that were most significantly influenced by the growth of evangelical Christianity. Thus, just as in the fields of print and oral culture, freethinkers during this period mirrored the social strategies of their religious counterparts in order to subvert the religious social hegemony.

The relationship between Bostonian freethought and New England transcendentalism, facilitated partly by geographical proximity, illuminated the social

¹ Grasso, "Skepticism and American Faith," 495.

connotations of anti-religious thought. Both ideologies agreed on the autonomy of the individual mind; indeed, the transcendentalist argument that god was represented by everything in nature was in many respects compatible with the atheistic argument that there was no intervening god at all. Unitarianism and transcendentalism therefore represented a bridge between traditional Christianity and freethought. Yet tensions existed between the two systems of thought. Orestes Brownson, a young Unitarian in the 1830s, angered his parishioners when he invited Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen – radical freethinkers and leaders of the Working Men’s Party – to speak with him. In response, Brownson advertised his Unitarianism as a Christian alternative to freethought.² The great transcendental thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson was equally forced to defend himself from charges of infidelity. As the historian Philip Gura has noted, “In light of the confluence of Kneeland’s (and Wright’s) sympathies with the lower classes and Emerson’s notion of the divinely empowered individual, Transcendentalist doctrine now was linked to disruption of the social as well as religious order.” Kneeland’s conviction for blasphemy in 1838, if it didn’t lead to similar consequences for Emerson, certainly exacerbated the undesired synonymising of freethought and transcendentalism.³ The antagonism with which most transcendentalists met such synonymising illustrates the continuing view in the 1830s of freethought as a socially vacuous phenomenon.

Emerson’s views about reform helped to distance transcendentalism from Kneeland’s beliefs. For Emerson, communal reform movements were necessarily founded upon internal, individual reflections on the ways in which society could be

² Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 110.

enlightened. Radical individualism was therefore an inherent prerequisite for radical communalism.⁴ In contrast, for Kneeland and other freethinkers, membership of a radical group was a *means* to inspire individual transformations in social thought.

Kneeland's descriptions of his belief or disbelief in god further establish links between his freethought and transcendental ideology. In his defense during his trial for blasphemy, he noted that "God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are perfectly synonymous terms." Hence, he continues, "I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God." He also alludes to the humanistic elements of transcendentalism: "the whole duty of man consists in living as long as he can, and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives." This was more than an attempt to appease his accusers; Kneeland fully accepted the possibility of his becoming an ideological martyr. "And if it is so," he wrote, "that I should be flung into that breach [prison] to make a bridge for others to march over my back, for the sake of storming that citadel [religious intolerance], I cheerfully offer myself as the victim, and shall never shrink from that arduous duty while I have life."⁵

After Kneeland's eventual conviction in 1838, a letter circulated around Boston remonstrating for his freedom on the ground of civil liberty. More significant than the language of the petition were the individuals who signed it. Among the names were those of Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing, Transcendentalist intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson, historian and educational reformer George Bancroft, and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Certainly these men differed from

⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁵ Levy, *Blasphemy in Massachusetts*, 38-39.

Kneeland in their religious beliefs, but they united against what they perceived to be the breach of basic rights resulting from religious hegemony over the judicial system in Massachusetts. The petition was counter-acted and ultimately discarded in the presence of a conservative plea on behalf of the conservative clergy supporting Kneeland's prosecution.⁶ Although Kneeland's defence and the public support of New England intellectuals ultimately failed to secure his freedom, they may have influenced the longevity of blasphemy cases in the United States. Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, as Levy notes, has the "precarious honor" of being the last judge in America to send a man to prison for blasphemy. Bostonian freethought was designed to address more than the philosophical issue of the existence of an intervening deity; Kneelandites engaged with both legislative and social acts of oppression in order to deconstruct the stereotypical linking of irreligion with immorality.

In this context, both the *First Society of Free Enquirers* and the *Investigator* were established to promote a single issue through which all other problems would ultimately addressed: education – specifically, the "acquirement and diffusion of useful knowledge, and the education of our children, without regard to religious opinions, orthodoxies, and creeds."⁷ Indeed, the fact that Bostonian freethinkers "perceived a connection between their benighted intellectual condition and their standing in society was one source of the power of their appeal, particularly to the poor and to women."⁸

⁶ Ibid., xx.

⁷ *Boston Investigator* October 21, 1831.

⁸ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 204.

The 1830s represented a period of concerted educational reform in Boston, led mainly by Horace Mann. In 1837, Mann became secretary of the newly established Massachusetts Board of Education. He succeeded in establishing a system of Common Schools in the state – ultimately based on a model of the Prussian educational system, which he had observed on his travels in the early 1830s – thereby making education available to those who had previously lacked access to formal schooling. While this egalitarian desire to provide education to all conformed to Kneeland’s educational ideologies, a marked disagreement was evident in their views concerning the place of the Bible in education.

Although Mann suggested that his educational model was a secular one, he in fact argued strongly for the use of the Bible as a foundational text for students. For Mann, religious instruction in schools is only undesirable “when a teacher has no knowledge of the wonderful works of God, and of the benevolence of the design in which they were created; when he has no power of explaining and applying the beautiful incidents in the lives of prophets and apostles, and, especially, the perfect example which is given to men in the life of Jesus Christ.”⁹ Religious instruction should therefore provide a central part of a child’s education, so long as the teacher is sufficiently knowledgeable of Biblical texts. In his 1844 report, Mann notes that, out of the 308 towns in Massachusetts, only three did not generally use Scriptures in their schools.

It was this encroachment of the church within schools which Kneeland and Bostonian freethinkers particularly disputed. Mann implicitly cites the influence of freethought, when he writes, “I believe all attempts will prove unavailing to disparage

⁹ Horace Mann, “Annual Report on Education, 1843” in Mann, *Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts for the Years 1839-1844* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1891), 344-345.

the religious character of Massachusetts ... or to show that its institutions and its people are not as deeply imbued with the divine spirit of Christianity as those of any other community upon the face of the earth.”¹⁰ Moreover, Mann disagreed with the idea that science and religion were becoming incompatible. Instead, for Mann, “between true science and true religion there can never be any conflict. As all truth is from God, it necessarily follows that true science and true religion can never be at variance.”¹¹

Naturally, freethinkers used the *Investigator* to disseminate their arguments against the continuing marriage of faith and education. An article in 1846 reprinted a passage written by Kneeland, arguing against the establishment of Sunday Schools in Boston. The editors at that time – Seaver and Mendum, who had succeeded Kneeland following his migration – believed that Sunday Schools had paradoxically served to undermine the pervasive dominance of revealed religion: “We think ... the clergy have failed in making Sunday Schools a successful instrument for the promotion of their designs. They hoped, undoubtedly, to call all the sheep into the fold by these means. But ... by the little light they poured into the [children’s] minds while teaching theology, they gave them the power of drawing the bandage from their eyes.”¹² Freethinkers forced educational reformers to act under the pretence of secular ideals, but failed to rid schools of faith-based texts as foundations of both general and religious education.

¹⁰ Ibid., Annual Report, 1844, 434-435.

¹¹ Louis Filler (ed.), *Horace Mann on the Crisis of Education* (Yellow Springs: The Antioch Press, 1965), 8-9.

¹² *Boston Investigator* April 29, 1846.

Nevertheless, freethinkers were able to shape social policies simply by making their presence in antebellum Boston conspicuous. The humanitarian and religious apologist Samuel Howe's article in *New England Magazine* – written in the context of the worrying rise in the population of infidels – again perhaps provides the clearest indication of the extent to which freethinkers were finally being acknowledged in discussions concerning social initiatives:

We have endeavored, thus far, not to write as religionists of any sect, but have regarded the evil of infidelity as a social one; we pity, and we hope God may pity, these deluded beings; but we meddle not with their religious belief; we complain not of the insults to our religion, but we should be faithless to society if we did not endeavor to point out the danger. The whole tendency of these doctrines is to destroy every thing like morality, to remove all restraints from the passions of the ignorant, and break up the foundations of society by destroying confidence between man and man.¹³

This passage served two purposes. Firstly, Howe was attempting to otherize “evil” atheists, in contrast to religionists of all sects. He did this through the language of the first person plural – “we.” Indeed, this was an attempt to claim the intellectual moral high-ground by claiming that religionists were not “meddling” with the “beliefs” (or lack thereof) of the unbeliever. Secondly, Howe argued that the incorporation of atheistic thought into social discourse and activity was tantamount to the destruction of morality and the essential foundations of communal relationships “between man and man.” For Howe, therefore, atheistic attacks on the social control exerted by Christianity were far more threatening than heretical intellectual arguments against the revealed truth of religious texts and teachings.

¹³ Howe, “Atheism in New England,” 501.

The historian Albert Post has noted the difficulties faced by unbelievers by stating that “Infidels were frequently portrayed as drunkards, murderers, thieves, child-beaters, and as addicted to violence and law-breaking.” Consequently, “It was argued that infidelity served no useful purpose, merely attempting to destroy Christianity without the substitution of anything satisfactory in its place.”¹⁴ Both liberal and conservative Christians alike refused to cede the remaining forms of civil religion as a means of social *control*.

Indeed, opponents of the perceived absorption of atheistic thought into antebellum American society made explicitly public attempts to maintain the traditional religious hierarchy. As Post notes, “Feeling that the mere statement that freethinkers were immoral and depraved might not convince the more objective reader, the opponents of infidelity attempted to fortify their accusations by citing examples of licentiousness and criminality.” In particular, religious publications and sermonizers cited the licentious books of Voltaire and Diderot – “Americans were warned that they must prevent the United States from following in the footsteps of France.”¹⁵ Freethought was not only poisonous to the essential values and principles of American society; it was also inherently unpatriotic and un-American. In the face of such slander, freethinkers engaged with a variety of pertinent contemporary social issues. This not only increased the social frontiers along which anti-religious thought could be disseminated, but also enabled the freethought community to redraw the accepted picture of their beliefs and actions as being immoral.

¹⁴ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 202, 207.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

A primary complaint articulated by atheists was based on the poisonous effects of religious encroachments on specific social aspects of free society. Kneeland and others argued that institutional Christianity was responsible for the pervasive oppression and discrimination against blacks – both slave and free – and women. Further, religion was responsible for the withholding of sufficient levels of education to these social groups, facilitating their lower position in the nominally equal but actually oppressive social hierarchies.

Education, above all else, formed the foundations upon which the strength of evangelical revivalist Christianity had been built. The exclusive teaching of evangelical tenets – and the subsequent absence of philosophical and scientific arguments against revealed truths – was anathema to everything for which freethinkers stood. Proposed changes to the Massachusetts Constitution published in the *Investigator* in 1832, for example, included: “1. No laws on religious subjects and no oaths,” and “2. State funded education for all free from religious encroachment.”¹⁶ Free enquiry was not possible when the students were not allowed to enquire freely into numerous aspects of American thought.

Kneeland further used his paper to mount a wholesale attack on the “presumed conspiracy of nature and society to fix the subordination of women. There was no doubt in his mind but that such theories were merely projections of male self-interest.”¹⁷ Freethought periodicals – and the *Investigator* in particular – provide an insight into gendered, racial and class systems present in antebellum America from

¹⁶ *Boston Investigator* March 23, 1832.

¹⁷ *Boston Investigator* March 30, 1832.

the perspective of those who sought to subvert the pervasive and often oppressive cultural and social norms.

One of the few scholars to address the relationship between gender and freethought is Evelyn Kirkley, in *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen*. Kirkley explicates the dichotomized relationship between the two: “Freethought perceptions of woman as principal agent and victim of the church dictated two strategies for neutralizing feminized religion: women were a force to be either restrained or harnessed by Freethought.”¹⁸ Women were traditionally seen as the moral arbiters of American familial life, particularly within the context of the ideology of Republican Motherhood. Many freethinkers therefore doubted both their ability and willingness to participate in the fight against the power of the Church. Conversely, women’s condition was seen by some as the epitome of the dangers of organized religion. Their liberation from the tyrannical and oppressive bonds of the Church could represent a significant and very public victory for the freethought movement. This internal opposition took place within the context of a discourse on “separate spheres,” the ideology that dictated that women should remain domesticated and should not involve themselves with politics. “Spheres preservers” explicitly rejected female suffrage, maintaining that women were incapable of, or corrupted by the performance of, tasks usually linked to the male sphere. “Spheres synthesizers,” on the other hand, worked actively to blur the line between male and female fields of influence, arguing both that women deserved to be enfranchised and that female suffrage was a necessary target for the freethought movement.

¹⁸ Evelyn Kirkley, *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen: Gender and American Atheism, 1865-1915* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 49.

As the historian Eric Schlereth has noted, “Every woman who became a free enquirer was at least one less soul devoted to Christianity.” Thus, “For free enquiring men, the existence of disbelieving women provided a useful bludgeon against the authority of evangelicals.”¹⁹

Anne Gaylor has similarly argued, in her collection of writings by female freethinkers, that “the women’s movement has not acknowledged the debt it owes to the unorthodox, freethinking women in its ranks. Their non-religious views often have been suppressed, as if shameful, when in fact repudiation of patriarchal religion is an essential step in freeing women.” Indeed, “the status of women and the history of the women’s rights movement cannot be understood except in the context of women’s fight to be free from religion ... if there was one cause which had a logical and consistent affinity with freethought, it was feminism.”²⁰ Susan Jacoby supports these claims when she notes that Elizabeth Cady Stanton was censured by her fellow suffragists after the publication of the *Women’s Bible*, “which excoriated organized Christianity for its role in justifying the subjugation of women.”²¹

Numerous articles in the Investigator concerning women’s rights reflect the importance of the growing historiography on the role of women in the freethought movement. The number of editions that tackled this issue increased conspicuously following the radical Seneca Falls Convention, organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, in 1848, which called for the enfranchisement of women. One

¹⁹ Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 198.

²⁰ A. L. Gaylor (ed.), *Women Without Superstition: “No Gods – No Masters”* (Madison, WI.: Freedom From Religion Press, 1997), xiii-xv.

²¹ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 10.

article stated, “We have often asked ourself this question – ‘Why is woman so unsparing of her own sex when she is the best judge of its weakness and temptations?’ This is every way unreasonable – detracting alike from woman’s tenderness and dignity, – from her humanity and intellect.”²² Women, freethinkers argued, did too much to please man, even after abhorrent acts of misogyny.

Surprisingly, the actual convention at Seneca Falls received limited attention in the *Investigator*, and only more than two weeks after the meeting. This was primarily due to the lack of publicity before the event, but perhaps also due to the apparent connections between the meetings and religion. The short news article in the *Investigator* explicitly notes that the convention “was held in one of the churches in the village of Seneca Falls.”²³ Nevertheless, this national event catalysed greater engagement with the issue of women’s rights on behalf of unbelievers. The *Investigator* described the Rochester convention for the rights of women, attended by Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass, as being “of highly interesting character, and the discussions of the Convention evinced a talent for forensic efforts seldom surpassed.”²⁴

Women’s rights and education were intricately intertwined with reform movements. Many female reformers articulated the necessity of greater intellectual training as a means to emancipate women from their male-constructed, restricted domestic sphere. Kneeland and other contributors to the *Investigator* made both direct and indirect efforts to illustrate greater female involvement in antebellum society.

²² *Boston Investigator* July 26, 1848.

²³ *Boston Investigator* August 2, 1848.

²⁴ *Boston Investigator* August 30, 1848.

Firstly, and most explicitly, the *Investigator* published numerous articles expounding the intellectual and social justifications for women's rights. Secondly, Kneeland published many letters and other correspondence written by women. In the reports on his travels published regularly in the *Investigator*, Kneeland frequently noted the proportion of women in his audiences; "If they were conspicuously underrepresented, he construed it as a failure on the part of the local promoters and told them so."²⁵

Samuel Howe and other opponents of freethought were acutely aware of the dangers posed by Kneeland in these specific social arenas:

The licentious men, and misguided females, who congregate in this temple of iniquity, are furnished by this hoary-headed apostle of Satan with a full knowledge of those ingenious contrivances by which they vainly attempt to cheat nature in its common courses, and relieve iniquity from the punishments which of right wait upon it. Dares he deny this? We are prepared to prove it, and to show that he merits epithets which we will not use now, lest, perchance, the law should have its due course, and send him to hammer granite among his betters at a neighboring institution, when it might be supposed we attacked a defenceless foe.²⁶

Howe's explicit citation of "misguided females" suggests the particular disquiet with which religionists responded to the inclusion of women in freethought communal activities, particularly in the context of the traditional view of women as the moral arbiters of the domestic household. The *Investigator* publicized this disquiet through its reprints. It reprinted an article from the Christian *Boston Daily Bee*, entitled "Infidel Women in France," which states, "There can be no greater blight on any country than the influence of infidel mothers." This echoes American ideas about

²⁵ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 211.

²⁶ Howe, "Atheism in New England," 207.

the Christian morals of Republican Motherhood. The *Investigator*, in opposition, argued that “the purest-minded and most benevolent women of the age are to be found among those entertaining Infidel sentiments, or opposition to the prevailing religion.”²⁷

Three primary areas of social activism were, therefore, chosen by freethinkers as being of particular significance: education, slavery, and women’s rights. These represented the primary contemporary social issues over which religion exercised the greatest influence. There were of course many Christians who fought against the institutional persecution of groups who lacked a political voice: blacks, women and children. Yet, for the most part, Christian dogma was both a coercive force and intellectual justification for the maintenance of the discriminatory status quo. William Lloyd Garrison – perhaps the most influential abolitionist of the antebellum era – explicitly distanced himself from organized Christian churches.

Kneeland’s relationship with the antislavery movement is not transparent. Somewhat surprisingly, abolitionism did not represent a primary social subject tackled by the *Investigator*. In many ways, women’s rights and education were portrayed as far more pertinent and constructive social aims than the destruction of slavery.

Kneeland did have personal links with William Lloyd Garrison; he had provided a venue for Garrison’s anti-slavery meetings, after the abolitionist had been refused numerous times by other property owners. Indeed, Garrison and Kneeland had offices directly next to each other in central Boston, and would likely have conversed frequently. However, as Roderick French has noted, Garrison’s desperation for a

²⁷ *Boston Investigator* August 16, 1848.

public platform and “commitment to his special cause outweighed his antipathy for unreligion.” Although Garrison had become somewhat disenchanted with organized churches and their indifference to the cause of emancipation, he nevertheless maintained that the destruction of slavery was the only way the church could regain its integrity. French further suggests that, once Garrison had established himself in Boston, he and Kneeland became “rivals for the reformist heart” of the city.²⁸ This rivalry prevented the close integration of the causes of emancipation and freethought.

Thus, as Post has argued, “infidels rarely advocated radical abolitionism, for they were determined to annihilate first the greatest evil, Christianity.”²⁹ In 1826, when still a Universalist, Kneeland denounced slavery as a national sin, and the prospectus for the *Boston Investigator* committed the freethought paper to abolition. But slavery, as Christopher Grasso has suggested, “became for him a parenthetical aberration rather than a cancer on the body politic.”³⁰ Clearly, in the case of slavery, Kneeland and other freethinkers determined that the deconstruction of Christian social hegemony would necessarily result in the destruction of the institution of slavery in the nation.

Underlying all of these concerns was a desire to court greater support among the working-class, particularly in the urban centers of Boston and New York. The period of increased labor activity during the first half of the nineteenth century has been viewed from numerous economic, social and cultural perspectives. There has,

²⁸ French, *The Trials of Abner Kneeland*, 156-160.

²⁹ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 208.

³⁰ Grasso, “Skepticism and American Faith,” 495.

however, been no attempt to explicate the significant relationship between freethought and the working classes. Greenberg argues that, for these men, “no separate spheres reality (or ideology) existed.”³¹ This rejection of the perceived social barrier between men and women was in part facilitated by the growth of freethought; increasing opposition to religion was accompanied by a growing recognition of gender equality in the absence of scriptural oppression.

Women’s rights and labor issues were far from mutually exclusive fields of interest for freethinkers. In an early edition of the *Investigator*, Kneeland asked, “Why should women’s wages be much less than that of men, even for doing the same work, and doing it equally well?” The subjugation of women in the labor market was, for Kneeland, yet another example of oppression facilitated by the social indifferences of evangelical churches in this area. Under such circumstances, Kneeland boldly stated, “Nine tenths of the marriages will be nothing but prostitution” in American society. Women, he argued, were necessarily and inescapably dependent on their husbands for all means of subsistence and cultural nourishment.³² By illuminating the effects of religion on both genders within the working class, Kneeland widened the potential pool of support available to the freethought movement.

Infidels were of course not alone in attempting to court the lower classes. In August 1834, a protestant mob in Boston burnt down a Catholic convent in the nearby suburb of Charlestown. While the national reaction was largely one of revulsion, anti-Catholic sentiment still reigned in the puritan cities of New England. Protestant preachers spread propaganda, particularly among lower class families, that Catholics

³¹ Joshua Greenberg, *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), xvi.

³² *Boston Investigator* July 29, 1831.

were trying to convert their children to Rome. Kneeland and other freethinkers sympathized with the plight of the nuns – who were never compensated for the damage to their property and who were eventually forced to relocate to Canada – in an effort to subvert protestant hegemony in the city.³³ The poorer sections of Boston's population represented a ripe source of prospective support, over which a propaganda war was continually waged.

Sean Wilentz and Joshua Greenberg have expounded two competing theses on the priorities of those advocating for the rights of the working-class. Wilentz argues from a capitalist economic standpoint, whereas Greenberg argues for a more “tangible world where issues such as rent, food, and childrens’ education are the driving force for organized labor’s rhetoric and activities.”³⁴ Greenberg explicates an inherent connection between working-class activism and the domestic sphere, in which political or work-place organization are seen in the context of the working man’s family obligations. In an analysis of the inner workings of the Working Men’s Party, Greenberg concentrates on the relationship between education and religion. He cites Robert Owen’s education plan, the basis of which was that, “if children received an equal education they would become equal adults, and thus the contemporary problems of poverty, aristocracy, and injustice would be solved.” Indeed, Owen’s motives mirror those of Kneeland; as Greenberg notes, “For a free thinking, anti-religious man like Owen, the desire to place the state in control of the education system was at least partly driven by an attempt to deny the clergy access to the children’s minds.”³⁵ Owen

³³ Ray Allen Billinton, “The Burning of the Charlestown Convent,” *The New England Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1937): 7, 24.

³⁴ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

³⁵ Greenberg, *Advocating the Man*, 164-167.

and Kneeland therefore framed their arguments concerning education within a domestic framework – parents have a *responsibility* to provide their children with a rational education free from an exclusive devotion to Biblical texts.

The freethinking Owenite faction of the Working Men's Party ultimately failed to win over the majority opinion, importantly illustrating that most working men maintained close links to organized religion. Most freethinkers were working men, but not all working men were freethinkers. Numerically, however, the working class provided a vital source of support that was usefully effected through freethought periodicals and, more specifically, through the reprinting of articles from working-men's publications.

The *Investigator* – and Boston's freethought community in general – survived not only because of the financial foundation provided by a small number of proprietors, but because it courted a working class that was open to the consumption of anti-religious thought. Intuitively, those least satisfied with the social and economic status quo were most open to challenges to the tradition social influence of organized religion. By appealing to specific groups through social activities – made conspicuous through printing (and reprinting) and oratory – freethinkers greatly increased the market demand for the consumption of anti-religious, skeptical thought. The *Investigator*, for example, published an article in 1848 addressing the public insurrections in France. It suggested that these events were caused by jealousies between labouring classes and non-aristocratic wealthy elites. "Men who have risen into power alone," the article stated, "and who have accumulated their wealth by a constant struggle with the poor man, who are in their employ, and who know their gains will be proportional to the poverty which they can inflict on their workmen, are not likely to feel much sympathy for the class who are in an antagonistical position

with themselves.” Thus, freethinkers attempted to illuminate the difference between the virtuous laborers and the oppressive elite in vertically constructed social hierarchies: “Monarchy is dead in France, but we fear the dragon-headed aristocracy is yet living and ruling.”³⁶ Boston’s freethinkers empathized with the working-men of France, and in doing so attempted to incorporate freethought into the global community of those suffering oppression. The *Investigator* implicitly equated the tyrannical “men who have risen into power alone” in France with the power of evangelical religion in the United States. Both, unbelievers argued, facilitated the subjugation of certain sects of society, particularly among the working-classes.

Every social position adopted by Boston’s freethinkers was intertwined, connected by a single desire to diminish the perceived oligarchic influence of religion on society, and particularly on those who were powerless to prevent such oppression. Ultimately, freethinkers in Boston sought to facilitate the construction of a social system centered on education. The incorporation of religious skepticism into public education would allow for free enquiry and the subsequent consumption of rational knowledge, which freethinkers believed to be the primary source of human *social* progress. In particular, working men and women responded to Kneeland’s charge that “the social and political promises of the Revolution remained unfulfilled for large classes of people and to his denunciation of the churches as instruments of the aristocracy responsible for this betrayal.”³⁷ Freethinkers were required to instigate

³⁶ *Boston Investigator* July 19, 1848.

³⁷ Post, *Popular Freethought*, 211.

their own rational and skeptical revolution in order to facilitate the nation's return to the virtuous, deistic principles of the late eighteenth century.

The aims of evangelical missionaries in the early-nineteenth century to establish a "Benevolent Empire," which aimed to Christianize the nation through claims to moral and social reforms, were directly mirrored by contemporary freethinkers. Unbelievers engaged in social issues in order to counteract the growing influence of evangelical religion in the country.

CHAPTER IV

EPILOGUE: THE NEW ATHEISM

The precedents set by early nineteenth-century American freethinkers provided domestic foundations for the growth of irreligion in the United States. There has been a general upward trend since the 1880s of the number of citizens willing to acknowledge their loss of faith. Today, news programs – especially those on the conservative right – frequently bemoan surveys and polls that evince the growth of atheism in America and other developed countries.

The fact that atheism is no longer perceived as a foreign phenomenon, that unbelievers in America today can point to specific individuals, organizations and communities in order to domestically historicize their own beliefs, has been a necessary facilitator of the declining proportion of the American population who label themselves as people of faith. In particular, nineteenth-century unbelievers drew conspicuous links between freethought and the revolutionary legacy, thereby providing a patriotic, domestic aspect to anti-religious thought.

It is difficult to draw direct lines between historical and contemporary American atheism. This is particularly true of the Bostonian freethought of Abner Kneeland, who has thus far remained at best peripheral in general histories of unbelief. The role played by early nineteenth-century writers, sermonizers, and common members of freethought communities therefore remains relatively unacknowledged. By maintaining public consciousness of infidelity, and in some cases coercing evangelicals to define themselves in the context of unbelief, Kneeland

and his contemporaries prevented the completion of evangelical efforts for complete social hegemony.

The similarities between “New” and early nineteenth-century atheism are therefore most evident in their methods. In 1832, Kneeland issued an open challenge: he would give one hundred dollars to any person who could prove the authenticity of the author and time of writing of the Gospels, or that Jesus ever existed.¹ Nearly two-hundred years later, Christopher Hitchens offered an open challenge to the American public to name one moral action which could be performed by a person of faith but would be beyond the reach of an unbeliever. In both instances, religious devotion – both its intellectual justifications and social intrusions – was dragged into a public confrontation with its detractors.

In this context, the term “New Atheism” is somewhat misleading. The “New Atheism” of Dawkins and Hitchens is “New” only in respect to the disorganized nature of freethought in the second half of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century. The structure of today’s movement owes its existence to the precedents set by Kneeland and other pioneers in the early 1800s. Modern atheism represents a reconstruction of early nineteenth-century models. Both periods saw the use of new, innovative techniques of dissemination facilitated by technological advances. Dawkins’s use of social media is, simply, a modern version of Kneeland’s use of the print market. Although they may not acknowledge it, freethought organization between 1825 and 1850 set the precedent for the integration of anti-

¹ *Boston Investigator* July 27, 1832.

religious thought into primary contemporary social debates and, eventually, public consciousness in general.

Modern sociological studies of atheism continue to stress the position of unbelief on the periphery of society: “The historical ‘otherness’ of the atheist tends to indicate that religion has functioned as one of the ‘moral boundaries’ of a certain American ‘imagined community’, perceived as an essential warranty of both individual virtue and ‘good citizenship’ and as a basic attribute of the American ‘self’.”² The role of faith is deeply ingrained into the American historical psyche. However, through more comprehensive studies of both clandestine and public acts of infidelity, the true extent of the freethought population prevalent in the United States through its history may be revealed. The illumination of historical, domestic precedents for unbelief represents a significant means by which New Atheists in the United States can recruit more to their cause.

² Amandine Barb, “‘An atheistic American is a contradiction in terms’: Religion, Civic Belonging and Collective Identity in the United States,” *European Journal of American Studies*, no. 1 (2011), <http://ejas.revues.org/8865>. Accessed January 26, 2013.

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